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ABSTRACT

A study explored how young adults view influences on their own conflict behavior: what examples had an impact on them and how; and what modeled strategies and tactics were available to them. Subjects, 172 undergraduates (119 females and 53 males), described in writing a conflict from their past which had a great impact on them in terms of how they should or should not behave in a personal conflict. Results showed that, overall, the profile of a significant conflict for the subject sample was a recent one in which the subject entered into conflict with peers who were perceived to be primarily responsible for the conflict. Violence was likely not present, and the conflict was handled by participants without the aid of an authority; however, participants engaged in undesirable conflict strategies, and the outcome was usually unsatisfactory to the subject. This sort of conflict is exactly the kind of conflict which can be most positively affected by skills instruction in workshop or classroom settings. The results of the study therefore indicated that formal instruction in conflict management strategies and techniques could have a significant impact on subsequent perceptions about future conflict behavior among young adults. (Twenty-one references are attached.) (SR)

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A Naturalistic Investigation
Of Interpersonal Conflict Strategies
Available to College-Age Youth

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A primary research concern in the area of conflict resolution has been the identification of specific strategies and tactics which either contribute to or hinder the productive management of conflict. Much research has been premised on social exchange theory (Homans 1961, Thibault and Kelley 1959) and experimental gaming (Pruitt and Kimmell 1977). These studies typically have itemized and tested conflict tactics which achieve or fail to achieve the individual's goal of "winning," that is, one party's successful persuasion of a target opponent. From this perspective, Marwell and Schmidt's (1967) "compliance gaining" behaviors have received extensive research attention (Miller et al. 1977; Cody and McLaughlin 1980). Though conceivably valuable to the professional bargainer, this approach and its results do not satisfactorily generalize to the interpersonal arena where preservation and enhancement of the parties' relationship, achievement of mutual goals, and satisfaction of social needs determine "productive" outcomes in conflict rather than "winning" a particular content issue.

The above concerns are addressed more effectively in

a second research line which has focused on the identification of "strategic dimensions" underlying tactical choice. Sillars et al. (1982) coded behavior of roommates during conflicts and determined that tactics chosen reflected one of three strategic categories: 1) avoidance; 2) competitive (distributive) engagement; or 3) collaborative (integrative) engagement. Similar strategic categories have been developed by Putnam and Wilson (1982); Walton and McKersie (1965); Rausch et al. (1974); Cupach (1980). A value orientation emerging from this research body is that the "collaborative" orientation is often most appropriate in the management and resolution of interpersonal conflict, where parties share relatively equal power, common interdependent goals, and a desire to maintain or enhance a mutually satisfying relationship (Hocker and Wilmot, 1985).

If such appropriate conflict strategies and tactics exist for the management of interpersonal conflict, where and how do individuals learn them? Though courses in conflict management are becoming part of university curricula and organizational training, the great majority of young people are not exposed to formal instruction. For most, role modeling of significant others, peer examples, and media portrayals are the primary sources of interpersonal conflict management strategies.

Extensive research has examined the impact of television violence on children's aggressive behavior (see reviews in Pearl, Bouthelet, and Lazar, 1982; Friedrich and Stein, 1973; McIntyre and Teevan, 1972).

Researchers have also examined the effect of adult modeling on both children's and adolescents' conflict behavior (Cummings et al., 1985; Steinmetz, 1977; Bandura, 1973; Jorgenson, 1985; Cummings et al., 1984). Pursuing a similar line, this study attempted to explore how subjects, particularly young adults, view influences on their own conflict behavior: what examples have impacted them and how; what modeled strategies and tactics are available to them. It was anticipated that they would perceive more negative influences than positive. That is, subjects would more frequently report poor modeling than examples they wished to emulate.

Methodology

One hundred and seventy-two subjects, 119 females and 53 males, enrolled in an undergraduate introductory communication course, were asked to respond in writing to the following: "Recall a conflict from your past which had the greatest impact on you in terms of how you should or should not behave in a personal conflict. You may have been a participant or an observer. Describe the

conflict in some detail and explain what you learned from it." Subjects also reported their age and gender.

Written responses were analyzed and coded using the following categories:

- a) S gender;
- b) S age;
- c) whether S was a participant or an observer;
- d) participant(s)' gender;
- e) relational role of participant(s);
- f) whether conflict was from S's recent or distant past;
- g) assignment or blame--self, mutual, or other participant(s);
- h) whether violence was present in the conflict;
- i) whether or not an authority figure was called upon to resolve the conflict;
- j) whether subject observed/experienced a strategy they wished to emulate (positive) or one they wished to avoid (negative);
- k) whether the conflict had a satisfactory or unsatisfactory ending.

In addition to the above coding, all recorded positive strategies were itemized and categorized.

Results and Discussion

Since 92% of the subject sample was between the ages of 18 and 27, insights gained from these results are applicable primarily to young adults.

First, in approximately 60% of the recalled conflicts, the subject was a participant, and an observer in the remaining 40%. These findings suggest that modeling is not as powerful a teacher as experience. However, the difference between the two sources is not great.

Second, although there were over twice as many female subjects as male subjects, males accounted for 59% of the other participants in the recalled conflicts and females only 41%. This result suggests that males participate in more conflicts than females, a finding somewhat in keeping with research that indicates boys are more often the victims, as well as the initiators, of peer aggression (Shortell and Biller, 1970; Patterson, Littman and Bricker, 1976; Whiting and Pope, 1974).

Third, over half of all recalled conflicts involved peers: friends, acquaintances, or coworkers. Family conflicts accounted for another 28%: parents, siblings, and other relatives. Although 81% of this sample was between the ages of 18 and 22 years, and many were living at home and dependent on parents and teachers, only 18%

of the reported significant conflicts involved authority figures, including parents, as participants. These findings suggest that subjects based their conscious perceptions about appropriate conflict behavior primarily on observation of, and experiences with, peers.

Fourth, 69.2% of the sample were conflicts from the subjects' recent past, and 30.8% from the distant past. Though psychoanalytic perspectives suggest that early family trauma leaves unconscious scars which affect lifelong behavior, perhaps recent experiences have an equally significant impact on our conscious interpersonal choices.

Fifth, subjects reported self-blame in 17.4% of the conflicts in which they were participants; mutual blame was reported in another 30% of this part of the sample. This finding indicates at least a retrospective awareness of personal responsibility of conflict process and outcome.

Sixth, violence was reported in 37% of the conflicts. The threat of violence was not coded, but noted in a number of additional conflicts coded as non-violent. This finding is not surprising in a culture which resorts to violence as a legitimate and acceptable conflict strategy in nearly every social context, from child rearing to international relations. However, in

only 5 instances was violence perceived as a positive strategy. These were cases of self-defense or responses to repeated, unprovoked verbal or physical aggression.

Seventh, in nearly 75% of the conflicts, participants handled the problem without the presence or aid of an authority figure (parent, teacher, etc.). This finding again suggests that young people select conflict choices based on peer behavior rather than authority models.

Eighth, in only 11% of the conflicts was a strategy observed which the subject wished to emulate. The remaining 89% contained strategies the subject wished to avoid. This finding emphasizes the need for formal instruction in positive alternatives in conflict situations. Often the individual resorts to habitual undesirable behaviors merely because she or he does not know constructive alternatives.

Lastly, in only 35% of the conflicts did subjects report a satisfactory outcome. It might be hoped that, as constructive conflict resolution strategies become part of the behavioral repertoire of individuals, the number of satisfactory outcomes to conflict situations would rise.

Positive Strategies

Only seventeen positive strategies or tactics which

subjects admired emerged from the data. These examples were placed into eight categories. Categories I through III involved physical violence. Category I, "Standing Up to the Physical Aggressor," involved using violence in self-defense or in response to repeated, unprovoked physical attacks (4 cases). Category II, "Non-violence," involved refusal to respond to provocation with violence (2 cases). Category III, "Authority Structured Violence," involved authority figures allowing already aggressive youngsters to fight it out under supervision (2 cases).

Category IV, "Defusing Another's Aggression," involved authority figures and peers responding assertively and nonviolently to another's anger, aggression, or inappropriate demands (4 cases).

Category V, "Talking It Out," included examples of both an authority figure and a peer calmly working out disagreements (2 cases).

Category VI, "Silence," was an example of an authority figure's refusal to respond to the angry demands of a child (1 case).

Category VII, "Authority Mediation," included one example of a parent's fair mediation of a conflict between two children through compromise (1 case).

Category VIII, "Defusing Anger," included one

example of an authority modeling of constructive ways to handle anger through exercise, delayed response, and rational thinking (1 case).

Though they include violence, the above examples offer good quality responses to the conflicts which youngsters must face. It is their scarcity, 17 out of 172 examples, which is unfortunate.

These examples emphasize the need for children and young people to be educated in how to respond to another's aggression, whether verbal or physical. This lack was evident throughout the reports.

Conclusions

Overall, the profile of a significant conflict for our subject sample was a recent one in which the subject conflicted with peers who were perceived to be primarily responsible for the conflict. Violence was likely not present, and the conflict was handled by participants without the aid of an authority. However, participants engaged in undesirable conflict strategies, and the outcome was usually unsatisfactory to the subject.

The above described conflict is exactly the kind of conflict which can be most positively affected by skills instruction in workshop or classroom settings. The results of this investigation, therefore, indicate that formal instruction in conflict management strategies and techniques can have a significant impact on the subsequent perceptions about future conflict behavior among young adults. 11

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